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# COLLECTIVE HUB

ISSUE 31

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# Lending a Voice

Countless CELEBRITIES put their name to a cause, but actress KRISTIN DAVIS has put her heart to one: the plight of the world's 60 MILLION-plus displaced people.

WORDS MELANIE DIMMITT

She's best known as a character whose charitable efforts didn't extend beyond black-tie benefits, a brief flirtation with volunteering for the visually impaired and fleeting aspirations of raising money for the paediatric AIDS wing of her well-to-do husband's hospital. But off the set of *Sex and the City* and out of the six-inch Manolos strapped to her polished, on-screen persona, Charlotte York Goldenblatt, Kristin Davis' humanitarian compassion runs deep – and has seen the actress venture far from Manhattan's Upper East Side.

"It is really all I do now," says Kristin, speaking of her work as a high profile supporter for the UN refugee agency, UNHCR. "The refugee crisis, because it's so huge, is one of these things where how we handle it will change the future, for good or bad... It is our world, and I just don't think we can pretend to live in our bubbles anymore."

The role, as well as those she holds with other NGOs, has taken Kristin to some of the world's remotest regions. Last year she embarked on a mission to Dungu, a town in the north of The Democratic Republic of the Congo, where rates of sexual and gender-based violence are so high it has been dubbed 'the worst place to be a woman'.

"You can't just bash around like my American self would like to do... It's tough when you're there, because you do feel a little like you're intruding," she says. While she was there, Kristin met with 2013 Nansen Refugee Award-winner Sister Angélique Namaika, a Catholic nun who fled the region in 2009 when The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) wreaked havoc there, but had since returned and single-handedly resurrected a "town of love and healing and acceptance." Sister Angélique now runs projects supporting women and girls who are victims of sexual violence by providing jobs, education and counselling.

"She talks a lot about how teaching [women] a livelihood skill keeps their hands busy, and they think less about the past. And who cannot respect that?" says Kristin. "You don't want to dwell on the pain of the past, you want to move forward in life. And part of the way to move forward in life is to work and to provide for your children and to provide for your community, and that's what she's allowing these women to do, so that they can move forward and feel good about themselves."

Which is exactly why supporting such livelihoods, Kristin says, is a current push for the UNHCR.

"If [women] don't have a livelihood to create independence then they're then subjected again to being vulnerable to this horrible, violent area. There's no services there, that we would take for granted, to help them. So the livelihood helps create a safe space... for their children to grow up and go to school."

While in Africa, Kristin visited a camp in Uganda's northern Adjumani District, home to more than 113,000 of South Sudan's 2.3 million displaced people.

"It is an overwhelming sight to see this outpouring of human beings, many of whom are being made refugees for the third or even fourth time in their lives," says Kristin, who adds that one of her most vivid memories was watching a UNHCR truck rumble across the border carrying "vulnerable, worn, traumatised human cargo."

"Everyone was covered in dust, everyone was bone-thin, everyone was dazed. Hardly anyone had any bags or belongings. They had fled wearing only their clothes and they had avoided the gunfire on the roads by hiding in the bush and surviving on berries and leaves for days as they journeyed to the border."

On that particular trip Kristin was especially taken by an "amazingly philosophical" refugee called John, who has been forced to flee South Sudan three times in his life and is the current head teacher at a primary school near Adjumani.

"He is not bitter. He is not angry. But he strongly believes that education is the answer to the problems of his native country. He feels passionately about educating the next generation of South Sudanese, so that when peace is achieved and they return to their country they can avoid repeating the violent patterns of the past," she says.

"That's what I love about supporting refugees. They're trying to lift up the other refugees, so that they will be able to have a life. And the greater vision is that this is the way the world will change, through education." >

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This account is vastly different to Kristin's first experience of Africa, by way of a tourist safari in Tanzania in 2001, where her tour guide did his best to deter her attention from poverty and the prevalence of AIDS amongst locals. She says he was "trying to give this beautiful, *Out of Africa* experience that all of us want, basically. And I realised then that there was a whole world happening, and a whole set of circumstances happening to people that I was not aware of. And that just going on a safari was not going to let me become aware of the realities that the people were dealing with."

Soon after, at a "very Hollywood party" at LA's Chateau Marmont, Kristin found herself "sandwiched" against Claire Lewis, Oxfam's Global Ambassador Programme Manager, who invited her to go back to Africa and see first-hand some of the challenges faced by the continent. It was a defining moment for Kristin.

She ended her role as spokesperson for cosmetics company Ahava, which was located in a Jewish settlement in the West Bank, which Oxfam considered illegal "settlement trade", and in 2011, a year after the second *Sex and the City* film hit screens, Kristin visited the Dadaab refugee camp in Northern Kenya – an experience she pinpoints as, "when I personally felt that the commitment to the refugees had to increase on my part, because it was so obviously a very global crisis."

At present, the number of displaced people worldwide has likely "far surpassed" 60 million. And, as Kristin says, "There's not a separation anymore." Indeed, the issue is affecting everyone.

*All these PEOPLE want to do is have a SAFE PLACE for their children to live and be EDUCATED so they can WORK...*

those people want to do is have a safe place for their children to live and be educated so they can work and be a functioning part of society.

"We shouldn't be fearful of refugees, we should be fearful for refugees," says Kristin, echoing the line that has fast become her catchphrase on the media circuit. "Because," she continues, "they've already been through hell, frankly. We're globally on-the-spot to take care of these people. It's in our best interest as well. If you want to talk about safety and security, a really great way to make us not safe is to let all those people stay disenfranchised and stay on the fringes, because there are other people out there who would love to go help them and feed them and



"[People] think, 'Well, where are those 60 million people going to go? I don't want them in my country.' And look, I get that," she concedes. "They just

haven't gone there and seen them, they haven't met them, they don't know how hard those people want to work, how all

indoctrinate them into their more angry way of thinking... We all have to fight, because those other bad people are really actively at it."

We spoke in Sydney as Kristin launched Australia for UNHCR's 'I Will' campaign, asking people to pledge their support for women and children refugees the world over. And while this Boulder, Colorado, native apologises for getting on her "soapbox", she has a voice for change that harks back to her trailblazing, Kansas-born mother and headstrong 107-year-old grandmother before that, Flossie, who hailed from the "hillbilly" mountains of Appalachia.

"I had a lot of really strong women to watch, strong in their own way," she says. "Where I grew up, the confederate



PHOTOGRAPHY: © UNHCR / JORDI MATAS

flag was still on the top of our capital building... Every single year my mother and her friends would picket to get that flag off. It took 30 years. And she worked at Planned Parenthood... She would say, 'I'm going to volunteer at Planned Parenthood, because those women need reproductive rights.' She had her own kind of maverick quality. She also wore Birkenstock, which I was just mortified by," Kristin says, mock aghast, channelling Charlotte to a tee.

The Emmy and Golden Globe nominee's on-screen life began by playing Brooke Armstrong on *Melrose Place*. She was later offered a lead role on what would be the revolutionary *Sex and the City*, based on the lives, uninhibited interactions and unshakeable bond between four Manhattan-dwelling professional women.

The show would go on to run six seasons, screening from 1998 to 2004, and spawn two big-screen films.

"I talk about *Sex and the City* every time I leave the house," says Kristin, who's remained close friends with her SATC posse (Sarah Jessica Parker, Cynthia Nixon and Kim Cattrall) and makes no secret of her desire to take part in a third movie. "I'm very proud of it... and obviously it lives with me in every way... it doesn't really recede."

In what was arguably a TV first, the show portrayed women having raw, honest conversations about work, sex and relationships – and, in its early days, had the cast "very panicked that people were going to flip out."

"We thought that the feminists were going to be very mad at us..." recalls Kristin. "Because it hadn't been done and we just didn't know what would happen. And then we were so relieved when it was embraced... It's very different to talking about refugee women, but then yet there's this kind of similarity in that not talking about things that are real to women, hurts women. We can't make things better if we can't even say it."

Now 51, Kristin's most recent acting work saw her West End debut playing Beth Gallagher in a stage production of *Fatal Attraction* in



2014. She also moved behind the camera that same year to produce a documentary about elephant poaching, *Gardeners of Eden*, which was born of her work with the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust in Kenya – and is the very reason her daughter Gemma Rose, four, is "surrounded by pictures of mummy with elephants."

"I don't show her all of our things because it's a little confusing," says Kristin, who adopted Gemma domestically in 2011. "I don't really want to say to her, 'All those people in that picture have nowhere to live.' But I give her a little bit because I want to explain why I'm gone. I want her to know that I'm gone for a very good reason – that I wouldn't leave her for something that wasn't something that I felt really passionate about."

She also wants to teach her daughter the importance of speaking up about things that matter, and that means starting in the playground.

"[Gemma] would give over her



toys and I'd be like, oh it's so sweet, she knows how to share. And this really wise teacher said to me, 'You need to go over there and you need to stand behind her. You need to advocate for her and tell her she doesn't have to give up her toys if she's not going to play with them. And I was like, 'That's right, I do! I forgot, I do!' Because you tend to think that polite behaviour in toddlers is

appreciated, but on the other hand, they need to feel like, 'This is mine, I can speak up for myself...' You know?' And, as Kristin points out, no matter where we are in the world, or how we do our day-to-day,

*Having a voice, SPEAKING UP, speaking about what's important, protecting other women, telling younger women, 'You have a VOICE, please speak up, we need you to SPEAK UP.'*

it's a learning we should all be taking to heart.

"Obviously in a much more vivid and horrible way for refugees who are at risk, but it's all kind of the same picture, in a way. Having a voice, speaking up, speaking about what's important, protecting other women, telling younger women, 'You have a voice, please speak up, we need you to speak up.' It's important. We want your voice. We need your voice." ■

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